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SUBJECT: HIMACHAL PRADESH ELECTIONS: BJP EDGE

REF: NEW DELHI 4835

11. (SBU) Summary: With the rhetorical back and forth between Congress and the BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party) over the US-India nuclear initiative and the Gujarat elections, little attention has focused on the December 19 state polls in Himachal Pradesh (HP). Based on anti-incumbency, conventional wisdom would have the BJP prevailing in a conventional campaign. On a two-day trip, Poloff found a campaign over the perennial issues - corruption, inflation, unemployment - with few new ideas or solutions. But in speaking with local journalists, Poloff also found a closer race than expected.

12. (SBU) Power in HP has traditionally alternated between Congress and the BJP, but this year Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is contesting in all 68 constituencies. However, HP looks to remain a two party state with the BSP unlikely to be a factor. It has managed to attract Congress and BJP dissidents with specific disaffections, but failed to generate any widespread enthusiasm with the electorate. The BJP still appears poised to win, but in a close race even a few BSP seats could tip the results the other direction. Votes will be counted on December 28. End Summary

BJP - Victory within Their Grasp

13. (SBU) One December 5 Poloff spoke with BJP National Secretary and HP election chief Satyapal Jain who exuded

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confidence that the BJP would win handily at the polls. Headlining the BJP ticket is former HP Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal. Jain admitted to some internal disputes within the party about its selection of candidates, but said he did not believe this would be a factor. When pressed by Poloff on which issues would decide the election, the BJP campaign manager offered the usual list: corruption, inflation, unemployment and development. Jain predicted a relatively peaceable contest which he contrasted with the noisy election in Gujarat. Asked about the role of the BSP, Jain dismissed the party as a real presence in HP and remarked that after the HP and Gujarat polls, the BSP would no longer be thought of as a potential national party.

¶4. (SBU) In recent days, BJP leaders L.K. Advani and Rajnath Singh have campaigned in HP. Tellingly, most of their remarks focused on national issues such as the US-India nuclear initiative or the much fiercer campaign in Gujarat. Advani characterized the HP Congress government as "dishonest" and railed against "widespread corruption" in the state.

Congress - Hoping to Hold On

¶5. (SBU) Anti-incumbency has been a powerful predictor in HP state politics. The current Congress government of Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh realizes it faces an uphill battle. When speaking with Poloff, even Congress National Secretary and election manager Captain Ved Prakash called the situation "challenging." Not helping matters, Congress faces its own internal dissension, as a few tickets were given to new candidates close to Sonia Gandhi instead of to longtime HP Congress loyalists. One new candidate had served in Sonia's security detail while another is the son of the Gandhi family's long-time cook.

¶6. (SBU) The Congress campaign strategy consists mainly of claiming to have fostered development during the last five years. Additionally Congress officials are quick to remind voters that with a Congress-led government at the Center, HP will fare far better in terms of development works and funds. As with the BJP's Jain, Prakash quickly batted away the significance of the BSP, and also predicted a straight Congress-BJP battle.

¶7. (SBU) Confirming its small state status, high-profile Congress leaders have not made the trip to HP. Thus far, only HP native Anand Sharma, UPA Minister of State for External

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Affairs, has stumped for Congress in HP. Sonia Gandhi was scheduled to headline a rally in Mandi but foul weather interceded. She will reportedly make another attempt at the hill state before polls open on December 19.

BSP - Looking to Capitalize on Disaffection

¶8. (SBU) The full participation of the BSP has injected the only drama into the HP polls. The BSP has selected former Congress minister Vijay Singh Mankotia as its Chief Minister candidate. Traditionally, HP has been a two party state with all attempts at a third party failing to take hold long term. The BSP did campaign in a few constituencies in the 2003 elections but garnered only a few percentage points. This year, fresh from its resounding victory in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the BSP is contesting for all 68 seats.

¶9. (SBU) Poloff spoke with Kanta Sood, BSP General Secretary for HP, as well as other BSP organizers in Shimla, most of whom were retired bureaucrats, tired of the cycle of corruption. The BSP does not espouse a particular ideology in HP; most BSP candidates are former Congress or BJP players. The only reason they have joined the BSP this time around is because they were denied a Congress or BJP ticket for one reason or another. Because of this, what votes the BSP does steal from the larger parties will depend upon the local popularity of the new BSP candidate. To the extent the BSP garners support based on general sentiment or respect for Mankotia, this will more likely dent Congress.

¶10. (SBU) HP does not have the grinding poverty of some of India's more densely populated states. Therefore, the BSP's message does not resonate as strongly with HP Dalits as with those in UP for example. Mankotia himself is a Rajput. Fully aware of the differing demographics, the BSP has tried to downplay its image as a caste-based party. "Why would we project Vijay Singh Mankotia, a member from the forward caste, as the chief minister of Himachal if we were a

caste-based party," BSP leader Mayawati asked at a recent rally in Shimla.

Closer Than It Looks from Delhi

¶11. (SBU) Most press reports from Himachal told of a conventional campaign in which anti-incumbency would prevail and the BJP would return to power. In meetings with Poloff, party operatives naturally talked up their party's prospects, but local journalists told a somewhat different story. Poloff met with local journalists who all saw a close race. Ashwani Sharma of the Indian Express believed the contest is tight but the BJP would pull it off in the end. Virender Thukar, Bureau Chief for Himachal Today, described the race as "50/50 with a slight edge to BJP because of anti-incumbency." And Pratibha Chauhan of the Tribune called the contest very close. Chauhan said she had thought early on that the BJP would win handily, but that the party had made a few missteps in selecting its candidates. This, she believed, had given the Congress a chance to get back into the race. None thought the "social engineering" campaign that had worked for the BSP in UP would play in HP.

The More Things Change...

¶12. (SBU) Comment: From the press coverage in Delhi in recent weeks, it would appear that the BJP is riding a wave of anti-incumbency to a relatively easy win in HP. However, after speaking with local party officials and journalists in HP, the picture that emerges is of the BJP and Congress locked in a close race. The BSP represents a wildcard. Mayawati's party has not garnered much grass roots support, but in a close election a few seats could tip the balance. While neither the Congress nor the BJP has offered any new ideas, the BSP offers only the prospect of a new choice. The historical seesaw of power dictates a slight edge to the BJP. Unfortunately, history also dictates that regardless of which party wins, little will change for the voters of HP,

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one of India's less-developed states. End Comment.
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